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The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qur'an: General Trajectories and Individual Approaches /

الاعجاز البلاغي للقرآن: اتجاهات عامة وآراء خاصة فيدراساته

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The Miraculous Eloquence of the Qur'an: General Trajectories and Individual Approaches

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When Walīd ibn al-Mughīra – God's curse be upon him! – chief of Quraysh and a man known for his eloquence heard [the Qur'an], he was struck into silence, his heart turned numb, his eloquence forsook him, his argument collapsed, his case was devastated, his impotence clearly appeared and his wits were befuddled; and he said: '... By God, there is a certain sweetness to his words, a certain grace ...'

Reported by Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*

You cannot be said to know a thing about eloquence until ... you put your finger on the distinctive qualities involved in the construction (*naẓm*) of words, until you enumerate them one after the other and name them one by one ...

°Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, *Dalā'il al-i'jāz*

These two quotes carry us from the spirit of the first appearance of the Qur'an amongst the Qurayshī Arabs down to the 12th century. The first exemplifies the reluctant and perplexed appreciation of the Qur'an even from the Prophet's antagonists who cast doubt on his prophethood, while the second yields the flavour of a work on literary criticism that represents the ultimate efflorescence of the 'science' that evolved for the purpose of investigating the mysterious majesty of the Qur'anic text, and defining the essence of its miraculousness and inimitability (*i'jāz*).

It is between the two cusps of this five-century period that we will be moving in this study, even though the trajectory we will be following will not be strictly chronological insofar as our focus will partly be on the work of particular exponents of the doctrine.

The essence of the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'an is that it is a miracle (*mu'jiza*), more specifically a diachronic miracle effective until the Day of Resurrection, according to the consensus of the community, and it is the central proof granted to Muḥammad in authentication of his prophetic status. The basis for this

doctrine is indeed provided by the Qur'an itself, which in six different loci invites Muḥammad's antagonists, those who deny his prophethood and declare the Qur'an a 'fabrication', to produce its like. 'Or do they say "He fabricated (the Message)?" Nay, they have no faith! Let them then produce a recital like it, if (it be) they speak the truth' (Q. 52:33–4). The challenge is subsequently reduced to ten verses, then to a single verse – yet the detractors cannot produce even that minimal amount.¹ Thus men's inability (°*ajz*) speaks for itself; and it is in the light of a case already won that the doctrine of *i°jāz* begins to unravel and assume its various expressions.

Yet the doctrine of *i°jāz* had to wait for another two centuries before these verses germinated into the full-fledged form of the creed: it is roughly in the middle of the 9th century that it becomes inappropriate to find fault with the Qur'an's style, while it is only in the late 10th century that the first of the seminal works on *i°jāz* are composed.² The Mu°tazilite Nazzām was among the first to broach the topic and ignite the debate, but it is mainly with Rummānī's (d. 994) *al-Nukat fī i°jāz al-Qur°ān* and Khaṭṭābī's (d. 998) *Bayān i°jāz al-Qur°ān* that the arguments begin to acquire greater cogency.³

Historical Reasons for the Growth of the Discussions

The historical reasons for the sudden propulsion of these discussions to the fore vary, and some are clearer than others. First of all, as has been noted by T. Khalidi, the period between the 9th and 11th centuries saw a flurry of scholarly activity directed towards the definition of miracles in general. The constellation of circumstances that brought this about included the rise of the Fatimid Ismā°īlī Caliphate (ruling from 909 in Tunisia and 969 in Egypt), the establishment of Šūfī schools, and the efflorescence of philosophical thought not least at the hands of Ibn Sina (d. 1037): ideas like the non-finality of Muḥammad's prophethood and the possibility of divine incarnation (Ismā°īlīs), the performance of miracles by people of as yet 'unaccredited' religious status (Šūfis) and the denial of the possibility of miracles altogether (philosophers) demanded the adoption of a well-articulated position. To this list one might also add the rationalism of the Mu°tazila, who – although one of their own, the Qāḍī °Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1024–5), was also responding to the above threats when he composed his works on Muḥammad's miracles – denied the possibility of the miracles of saints (*karāmāt*), declared miracles unnecessary in a divine message of dogmatic content (e.g. dealing with *nubuwwa* and *tawḥīd*), and tended to regard miracles altogether as a phenomenon of the past, thus flouting the very nature of the miracle of the Qur'an, which was in effect throughout the ages.⁴ Works like Bāqillānī's *al-Farq bayna'l-mu°jizāt wa'l-karāmāt* which sought to distinguish miracles from the charisms of saints and magic, and of course Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, his *tour de force* against the philosophers, and his polemic against the Ismā°īlīs preserved in his *Faḍā'ih al-*

bāṭiniyya, should be seen partly from the perspective of this background, though of course the last two works arose in response to a more variegated set of circumstances.

In addition to this, however, the timing of the *i'jāz* discussions happened to coincide with another phenomenon: it was in the 9th century that the Shu'ūbī controversy gained momentum, and it was a struggle in which the non-Arab peoples ranged themselves against their Arab conquerors and advocated their cultural and social superiority.⁵

Among the representatives of this movement, it is the secretaries and the poets that especially concern us here, because it was they that were bruited to be impugning the Qur'anic style in general and Arabic in particular, and it is said of a number of them that they attempted to imitate the Qur'an (see below). The secretaries (*kuttāb*) drew their power from their importance in the caliphal administration and their strength from the strength of the caliphate, and any attempt on their behalf to detract from the stylistic quality of the Qur'an can be seen on the broader political canvas of the manoeuvres between the caliphal authority and the authority of the '*ulamā*'. This power play has been described by W.M. Watt as the confrontation between an 'absolutist' (caliphate) and 'constitutionalist' ('*ulamā*', community) form of government.⁶ And just as the doctrine of the created Qur'an, according to Watt, served the purpose of undermining the source of the '*ulamā*'s authority, strengthening both the caliphate and its secretarial apparatus, likewise assaults on the Qur'an's style and the rejection of its 'miraculousness' would fulfil the same objective. And, as will be seen below, a common denominator in these two attitudes was the Mu'tazilite participation in both (for the notion of the Qur'an's *i'jāz* which many of them advocated effectively denied the scripture itself of its miraculousness).

Of course, it would not be just the Shu'ūbī sentiment of the (predominantly Persian) secretaries that would provide a motive for their assailing the Qur'an's literary worth but perhaps also 'professional pride' – they were becoming the standard-bearers of a new brand of eloquence, though mainly confined to prose. And, criticism of the Qur'an aside, derision of the Arabic language per se was equally inflammatory inasmuch as, in the highly charged context of the Shu'ūbī controversy, language became inalienably linked to religion: Jāḥiẓ (d. 868/9) already stresses the connection in his *Ḥayawān*, and by the time of Zamakhsharī (d. 1143) it is obvious that the efforts to sunder Arabism and Islam apart only served to entrench the equation.⁷ Another association forged in the same furnace was that of Shu'ūbism and *zandaqa*, a type of free-thinking stemming from pre-Islamic religions and suffused with dualist ideas and antinomian, cynical attitudes towards all moral systems. It is said to have flourished amongst the literate classes who looked beyond Islam for intellectual stimulation – the same classes in which Shu'ūbiyya thrived; and according to H.T. Norris,

Shu'ūbiyya was 'a literary pose ... a fashion in thought rather than a creed'.⁸ Given the above, perhaps it is easier to see how the tinderbox of religion, language and politics could make reports about attempts at imitating the Qur'an (*mu'ārada*) highly explosive.

Although Jāhīz in his tract *Fī dhamm akhlāq al-kuttāb* addressed no specific individual when he disparaged the secretaries for their avidity for finding fault with the Qur'an,⁹ it is Ibn al-Muqaffa' who usually finds himself at the wrong end of the stick in both charges of *zandaqa* and reports about attempted imitations of the Qur'an. He is said to be among a caucus of literati living in the middle of the 8th century that includes 'Abd al-Hamīd al-Kātib, Bashshār ibn Burd, and Ṣāliḥ ibn 'Abd al-Quddūs, who used to amuse themselves together by criticising the Qur'an and making attempts to parody it.¹⁰

Among the poets, charges of *zandaqa* also abounded in similar connections. In one of the earliest manifestations of the consciousness of the *i'jāz*, Abu'l-^cAtāhiya was pronounced a *zindīq* for claiming one of his poems surpassed the Qur'an in eloquence; so was Bashshār ibn Burd.¹¹ Attempts to imitate the Qur'an also appear – Mutanabbī (whose name may speak for itself), while still only seventeen years old, composed a set of *'ibar* (admonitions) which imitated the Qur'anic verses dating from the Meccan period, while Abu'l-^cAlā' al-Ma'arrī in the 11th century was accused of attempting to imitate the Qur'an in his *Kitāb al-Fuṣūl wa'l-ghāyāt*.¹² The latter is said to have made the last recorded attempt to imitate the Qur'an.¹³ In the case of the poets, both Shu'ūbī allegiances and 'professional pride' would provide an explanation for an antagonistic attitude towards the Qur'an. For to begin with, most of the prominent poets of the Abbasid period were of non-Arab descent (e.g. Bashshār ibn Burd, Abū Nuwās, Abū Tammām, et al.) and some were well-known for their Shu'ūbī leanings. Equally important might be the fact that from early on, the criteria for evaluating poetry had posited the poetry of the *Jāhiliyya* as the unattainable ideal, model and touchstone for evaluating the work of subsequent poets, and for many of them this must have seemed not only cumbersome but unjust. Those standards were held in especially high esteem in the milieu the poets frequented, the caliphal court¹⁴ – an attachment significant in another respect, namely that a number of them (such as Ibn al-Rūmī, Abū Nuwās, Bashshār and Abū Tammām) are said to have fallen into the orbit of Mu'tazilite ideas,¹⁵ and these included views which did not locate the miracle of the Qur'an in its stylistic qualities. Thus, to vie with and outshine pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'an itself, where 'Islamic' was equated with 'Arabic', might have been experienced as a great challenge on the part of poets fuelled by a defiance of Islam, a defiance of Arab superiority or merely 'professional' vanity, and perhaps also emboldened by Mu'tazilite ways of thinking.

If the above sounds tentative and conjectural, with little in the way of an enumeration of actual instances of *mu'āraḍa*, that is because such instances have the nature of rumours and are not, it must be admitted, all that many. Abdul Aleem, in his articles on the topic, would tend to dismiss many of the alleged cases of attempted imitation as calumnies springing from bias and spun at a later time; and he is not alone in this scepticism.¹⁶ Ibn al-Muqaffa^c is a case in point: his so-called *mu'āraḍat al-Qur'ān* is not unanimously ascribed to him, and those who accept the ascription doubt the 'subversiveness' of his intention;¹⁷ moreover, the commonplace of secretarial Shu'ūbism breaks down in his case, for he was among those who asserted the superiority of the (pre-Islamic) Arabs.¹⁸ It is also unclear to what extent such a doctrinal development could come about in response to the recalcitrance of an elite intellectual minority; if it did provide the impetus at least in part, this perhaps would explain the level on which both the literary and theological discussions of *i'jāz* unfold – a level which can be contrasted with that of works on the proofs of prophethood (*dalā'il al-nubuwwa*), where the miracle of the Qur'an, while indeed honoured, is given far less attention than the miracles connected to Muḥammad's life.¹⁹ One thing we would like to see, in any case, is to what extent the discourse is aware or oblivious of possible dissenters, i.e. is external or internal.

The above is not intended to suggest that the aesthetic merits of the Qur'an and the beauty of its language were novel realisations and 'discoveries' made in pursuing a polemical agenda, with no groundwork of previous general attitudes to pave the way. The Qur'anic text had been studied in its language and meanings from early on, as a glance at Ibn al-Nadīm's inventory of works on *ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, on its *gharīb*, *mushkil* and *majāz* can attest,²⁰ but it would appear that most of the attention it had received was geared more towards 'practical application', with the focus more on semantics and exegesis as a means of applying the text. This orientation towards the applicable would include genres like *faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, where the Qur'anic verses are extolled from a devotional standpoint, for their powers and metaphysical 'mysteries'; and the fact that a lot of the *aḥādīth* pertaining to the merits of Qur'anic verses were coined by religious-minded individuals for the purpose of kindling people's religious fervour can confirm the purpose underlying them.²¹

Having noted all the above, one can hazard an alternative – and perhaps much more plausible – hypothesis, namely that the formulation of the doctrine was prompted by the confrontation with Christian apologetics and polemics. As S. Griffith points out in his study of the prominent Jacobite apologist Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'īṭa (fl. in the first half of the 8th century), a coordinated Christian response to Islam only emerged after the Abbasid revolution, when the appeal of membership in the Islamic community was enhanced through the promise for inclusion and equality extended to all Muslim believers alike, making conversion an attractive option to upwardly

mobile Christians. Within the same bracket of time came the vigorous growth of *kalām*, which combined defence with offence in sculpting Islamic answers and questions to other religious identities and beliefs. As part of this same current, the first Abbasid century saw the first anti-Christian tracts being penned by Muslims – the best-known amongst these in the ninth century being °Alī Rabbān al-Ṭabarī, the Zaydī imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm and Jāḥiẓ with their polemical treatises similarly named *al-Radd °ala'l-naṣārā*.

These developments were among the operative factors for the growth of Christian apologetic and polemical literature, using Arabic rather than the previous linguistic vehicles of Syriac, Greek or Coptic, that aimed to defend the Christian faith from charges of 'absurdity' (such as that of a belief in a God who was Three in One) and to arm believers against the attractions of conversion. The Melkite Abū Qurra (750–825), the Nestorian °Ammār al-Baṣrī (fl. in the first half of the 9th century), and the abovementioned Abū Rā'īṭa were at the vanguard of this trend, a trend which produced such a salient Christian voice that Jāḥiẓ would single out the Christians as the chief scourge and most troublesome nuisance the Islamic community had to face: 'neither the Jews, nor the Manicheans nor the Sabeans have tried this community as badly as the Christians have, for they ferret out every contradictory *ḥadīth*, every report with a weak chain of transmission, every ambiguous verse of the Qur'an and then they take aside commoners and those weakest and question them about them'.²²

The miracles worked by Christ and his followers is an idea central to the Christian persuasive drive: 'He cleansed lepers, He made the lame to walk, He opened the ears of the deaf and the eyes of the blind, there was no sickness or weakness that He did not drive away'.²³ This stress on the thaumaturgic proofs of Christ's divinity came to occupy an equally central place in this nascent type of Christian Arabic literature as part of a theme dealing with the criteria for recognising the true religion. These criteria included the consideration of miracles as the best evidence of God's approval; thus the spread of Christianity, despite its offering no attendant worldly inducements, and the miracles worked in Christ's name by his followers cannot but proclaim the truth of the Christian faith. It may not be too great a leap to see the doctrine of *i°jāz* as the attempt to find the unique feature of Muḥammad's mission, which as a miracle would authenticate his prophethood and in its singular nature differentiate his mission from that of his predecessors. This attempt at differentiation is expressed in the idea that what magic was to Moses and what medical skill was to Jesus, eloquence was to Muḥammad: it was the skill of the age, the skill at its highest peak of development at the time of the appearance of each, which thus functioned as the subject matter for the authenticating miracle. If Moses confounded the sorcerers, Jesus the doctors and Muḥammad the poets and *maṣāqi'* (eloquent men) of their respective communities, there was no better proof that they had some supernatural backing in doing so.²⁴

By the 10th century, when the discourse of *i'jāz* had begun to acquire its distinctive features, Christian apologists may be seen to have woven this doctrine into the discourse on the true religion, and subsumed it into their critique of Islam: thus the *Risālat 'Abd al-Masīh ibn Ishāq al-Kindī*, estimated to have been written some time within the 10th century (and no doubt the evident acquaintance of the author with the concept and accompanying terminology of *i'jāz* is one of the reasons for fixing such a date) engages in a critique of this 'so-called' miracle which tries to be a match for Moses' cleaving of the sea or Jesus' raising of the dead.²⁵ This jibe about the Muslims' inability to produce an authenticating miracle that establishes divine endorsement adjoins criticism of the *contents* of Muslim revelation; neither the former (the formal condition) nor the latter (the material condition) measure up to the *a priori* criteria. Thus the arguments and ripostes flew back and forth along the same wires, within (what was probably) the formative context of criteria of the true religion.²⁶

The factors listed above as possible tributaries to the development of the doctrine need not be seen as mutually exclusive, especially as both the Shu'ūbī and the Christian fronts are related by time and origin: both appear as direct or indirect consequences of the Abbasid takeover and the new social scene opening up in its wake. In any case, an investigation of the historical origins of the discussions requires more time and space than we have within our present boundaries, and will have to await a more detailed study.

Internal Routes

Apart from the suggestions given above for historical reasons for the development of the *i'jāz* theme, Abdul Aleem proposes three *internal* channels which could lead to it.

One is that of *tafsīr*, where the verse-by-verse mode of commentary could not fail to provoke a treatment of the relevant verses. Thus Ṭabarī (d. 923) does indeed deal with *i'jāz*, though in a rather rudimentary way, and so does al-Qummī al-Nīsābūrī (d. end of 10th century) after him.

But the more important gateways would be through *kalām*. The controversy of the createdness of the Qur'an was one possible avenue, though sparsely trodden. More frequently traversed was the road of *nubuwwāt* (prophetic), which was essential to the *kalām* thematology. And the miracle of the Qur'an is indeed a centrepiece in the works of Ash'arite *mutakallimūn*.²⁷ The connection between the doctrine of *i'jāz* and *kalām* can be seen from the fact that of the early works written on *i'jāz* and on the construction (*naẓm*) of the Qur'an, a number are written by Mu'tazilite authors, such as Jāhīz, Wāsiṭī (d. end of 10th century), and, as mentioned already, Rummānī.²⁸

The best way to bridle the sprawling expanses of this topic is to begin by looking at

the aggregate range of theories of *i'jāz* put forth, and then go on to examine the approach of the two towering figures in the field, the *qāḍī* Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) – credited with marshalling the full gamut of arguments and theories in his capacity as theologian and ‘literary critic’, and ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) – credited with having systematised literary criticism as a paradigm for understanding the miraculousness of the Qur’an.

Overview of the *I'jāz* Theories

One can hardly find a work on the topic of *i'jāz* that does not pose the same question: ‘What does the miraculousness of the Qur’an subsist in?’ If the Arabs did not know what they were challenged to imitate, it is argued, then the challenge (*taḥaddī*) would hardly be a ‘valid’ one.²⁹ It is in response to this question that the body of arguments and theories is adduced. From early on, the road bifurcated into two main sets of ideas: there were those who located the miracle *in the Qur’an itself*; and there were those who located it in something *outside it*.³⁰

The latter approach was represented by the theory of the so-called ‘*ṣarfa*’. First propounded by the Mu‘tazilite Nazzām (d. 835–45), its main thrust was that it was not the construction of the Qur’an itself that was the miracle, but rather God’s deflection (*ṣarf*) of people from imitation, depriving them of both motivation and ability. Nazzām thus believed that ‘if the Arabs were left alone they would have been able to compose pieces like those of the Qur’an’.³¹ He also, however, partly located the miracle in the Qur’an itself insofar as it contained knowledge of ‘*ghuyūb*’ – information which it would not have been humanly possible to come by, prophetic material being a prime example.³² Thus, to support the theory of *ṣarfa* was not incompatible with simultaneously supporting other elements of *i'jāz*, and this holds true of other supporters of the theory apart from Nazzām.

The theory dovetailed to an extent with the Mu‘tazilite creed of a created Qur’an, and their aversion to continuous divine interferences in the created order which the view of the Qur’an itself as a perennial miracle could be seen to entail. What seems odd, however, is the willingness of the exponents of free will (*qadar*) to exceptionally relinquish human freedom and recognise such an interference (though perhaps this would be a problem beleaguering miracles in general, insofar as a compelling sign would *coerce* one into believing).³³ This theory was not embraced by all Mu‘tazilites; apart from Nazzām, Hishām al-Fuwaṭī (d. before 833), ‘Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 864) and Abū Mūsā al-Murdār (d. 840) are said to have taken it up,³⁴ while the Imāmī Shī‘ī Mu‘tazilī al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044) was perhaps the last to do so, relying on the argument of *ṣarfa* to the exclusion of other factors.³⁵ However, it would seem that for certain Ash‘arite heresiographers, the idea came to be closely associated with the Mu‘tazilite school.³⁶

This theory, termed the 'lazy' theory of *i'jāz* by Rashīd Riḍā, did not fail to provoke resistance from many fronts. The most serious objection was that it made not the Qur'an, but the deterrence (*man'*), miraculous (*mu'jaz*), and that the miracle lasted only so long as there were attempts at imitation, breaching the consensus of the community, which declared its duration to be perennial. For indeed, it is stressed, the words '*mu'jiz*' and '*mu'jiza*', despite their transitive form, do not mean that God produced inability (*'ajz*) but their import is rather that of *revealing* existent inability.³⁷

Other arguments included Khattābī's interpretation of the verse, 'Say: "If the whole of mankind and jinn were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an ..."' (Q. 17:88), a verse which in his view implied *effort* and *exertion*.³⁸ Bāqillānī in his turn argues that were that the case, there would be no reason for the Qur'an to be so wonderfully constructed (seemingly taking the desired conclusion as the premise), and also it could not then be explained why no work capable of vying with the Qur'an in eloquence had not been produced *prior* to its revelation.³⁹ The second argument sounds rather blithe coming from an Ash'arite upholder of God's prescience and pre-determination of men's acts.⁴⁰ And indeed despite the vociferous chorus of objections to the *ṣarfa* theory, the Ash'arite concept of divine omnipotence (and interference) ultimately prevails, so that we find Bāqillānī himself finally leaning towards the endorsement of *man'* as miraculous; Juwaynī (d. 1085) and Ghazālī (d. 1111) are among those who follow suit,⁴¹ even whilst maintaining the *i'jāz* of the Qur'an itself – in this respect, not unlike the Mu'tazilite Rummānī.⁴²

The other set of theories located the miracle within the Qur'an, but there was plenty of speculation as to what exactly was covered by this. Suggestions include the information contained in it concerning future events or past people and epochs – the claim of the latter to miraculous status resting on Muḥammad's illiteracy; but both were usually rejected on the grounds that the challenge was to produce even a single verse, and not every verse contains such *ghuyūb* (mysteries of the unseen). Additionally, it is said that the Bible and the Torah also contain such elements, and thus it cannot be the distinctive feature of the Qur'an.⁴³ This, though, did not prevent the majority of *mutakallimūn* from citing this type of material as a component of *i'jāz*. Other suggestions link it to God's divulging what is on men's minds before it could have been humanly discerned. Finally, there are those who believe that *i'jāz* 'can be perceived but not described'.⁴⁴

However, the majority of opinions soon clustered around stylistics and eloquence as the seat of the miracle, and the argument mainly revolves around the inevitable trinity of semantics: words (*lafẓ*), meanings (*ma'nā*) and their structure/construction (*naẓm*). It is on *naẓm* that the claim of a stylistic *i'jāz* will finally be staked, *naẓm* standing

for the relation between words in synergy with the intended meaning. Thus the Qur'an's resplendent eloquence resides in the manner in which words have been perfectly joined to each other, rendering meaning with such flawless accuracy that no word could be conceivably exchanged for another without destroying the seamless verbal fabric.⁴⁵

Significantly, assigning *i'jāz* to meanings alone was rejected on the count that 'they are not of man's making'⁴⁶ – as meanings, they would represent the Eternal Speech of God (*kalām qadīm*), which the challenge *did not* concern, a fact which is indefatigably stressed throughout, for that would not be a 'valid' challenge. This interesting facet of the argument will need some further probing (see below).

Identifying what the miracle consists of was of course one thing and, if the discussion was ignited by adverse criticism of the Qur'anic style, its location in the general area of 'eloquence' was already prefigured. Yet, the fact that there were people who could denigrate the Qur'anic style made a further step absolutely essential, and that was explaining *the means by which one knows* the miraculous nature of the Qur'an.

Implicit in this endeavour is the recognition that the Qur'an is not a miracle that speaks for itself. Although Bāqillānī in his theological capacity will insist that miracles are *God's* act of proving the prophets' veracity,⁴⁷ he also speaks of 'coming to the aid' of the *i'jāz*⁴⁸ and his own writings are an eloquent witness to this need. The tension between the definition of a miracle as an act that 'breaks the custom' (*kharq al-ʿāda*) – i.e. the natural order of things⁴⁹ – and the eccentricity of this particular miracle in requiring search and inquiry (a miracle by *istidlāl*) makes for the woof and warp of these discussions. Jazārī's statement, reported by Zarkashī (d. 1392), to the effect that God 'was capable of compelling the pagans to acknowledge Muḥammad's prophethood ... but He sent His prophet within the order of causes and effects (*ʿalā asālīb al-asbāb wa'l-musabbabāt*)'⁵⁰ is one of a number of unobtrusive references one finds to the fact that the miracle's violation of custom is simply hard to detect.

As far as the Muslim community was concerned, the Qur'anic *i'jāz* could simply come to take its place among the articles of faith to be accepted – for the majority of people – by *taqlīd* (following authority). And for this audience it is fully adequate to speak of the subjective impact of the Qur'an on people and let intuition arbitrate in the experience, flourishing the type of material that makes its way into books on *dalā'il al-nubuwwa* like Iṣbahānī's, and which illustrates this effect by reports of conversions as a result of hearing the Qur'an recited and of the unbelievers' begrudging expressions of amazement.⁵¹ These last, though immovable in their denial, are struck by the Qur'an's majesty and 'otherness'. Yet not everyone turns to Islam, for 'the things to divert them are numerous' and could *override* the effect of the miracle.⁵²

The exigencies of polemics must have had a say in making the 'intuitive' approach inadmissible and forcing the scholars to define the ways in which the Qur'an's miraculousness could be reliably gauged. Classifying *i'jāz* as a miracle, knowledge of which was derived by proof (*istidlāl* – as mentioned above), two avenues of proof were open. One was what B. Weiss, in his exposition of the ideas of Ash'arite Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d. 1233), calls the way of 'circumstantial' evidence.⁵³ This was highly popular among the *mutakallimūn* and figured prominently in the special works on *i'jāz* as well, being the least specialised of the proofs and involving an accessible kind of rational argument more than knowledge. It can be summed up as follows: a) the contemporaries of Muḥammad, notwithstanding their being 'the most eloquent people on the face of the earth', as is often said, and being notoriously vain about their poetic skills to the point of competing over inane trifles such as the description of snakes and insects;⁵⁴ and despite their ample motives for taking up the challenge, such as Muḥammad's vilification of their gods and his declaring their lives and properties forfeit, did not do so and instead embarked on an arduous series of wars, thus breaking the 'custom' of normal behaviour;⁵⁵ b) evidently, the Qur'an has *not* been successfully imitated.⁵⁶

This argument was best tailored for the needs of those who were not versed in either literature or, even more fundamentally, the Arabic language, and could be convinced only by this type of 'indirect' evidence. Despite the attractions of its plot and structure, this aspect of the argumentation cannot detain us too long, however, for it is the 'direct' way of proving *i'jāz* that was to be espoused by those scholars who devoted full studies to the issue and was developed to a much higher degree. Moreover, the circumstantial argument could lend itself to the argument of *ṣarfa* just as well as to theories of *naẓm* as the essence of the miracle. Thus the 'direct' approach aims at unveiling the miraculous nature of the Qur'an from a literary standpoint, and more specifically within the boundaries of *i'jāz* as *naẓm*, and as M. Mir observes, represents the most valid basis of proof since it is unalloyed by theological undertones, for 'the Qur'anic challenge was addressed not to the believers but the unbelievers'.⁵⁷ Its most illustrious exponents were the Ash'arite theologian Bāqillānī and the (Ash'arite) literary critic Jurjānī; and to them we will now turn.

Bāqillānī: The Crossroads of Theology and Literature

Bāqillānī's work on *i'jāz* has been described by many as the apogee of the attempts to systematise the theories on the topic, effecting a synthesis of ideas which is partly due to his twin roles of theologian and literary critic. Although we will here begin by looking at the work in which he tries to articulate the theme within a purely literary paradigm, we will then be inevitably calling upon him in his theological capacity as well.

In his *I'jāz al-Qur'ān*,⁵⁸ Bāqillānī, dissatisfied with the existing treatments of the topic, promises to provide a firm foundation for understanding the miraculous nature of the Qur'an. He, too, speaks of the information on past and future events as participating in *i'jāz*, but in the limelight he places *naẓm* as the seat of the Qur'an's custom-breaking eloquence. What does breaking the custom mean for Bāqillānī, and what custom did the Qur'an break? Various answers are tendered, and they include, among other elements, the aspect of *ghuyūb* and the 'mysterious letters' (*ḥurūf muqatta'a*) at the beginning of the verses whose recondite nature and meaning had placed them in the category of '*mutashābih al-Qur'ān*'.⁵⁹ Yet his emphasis is on two main axes: a) its style which defies classification and b) the unfluctuating peak of eloquence it sustains throughout, despite the plethora of themes it deals with.⁶⁰

It is possible, if one expects a reiteration of familiar opinions present in other works on the topic, to miss what Bāqillānī is actually saying because of the singularity of his argument: his main point is *not* that the Qur'an broke the custom by an *extraordinary degree of eloquence*, but that it broke the custom of the *existing literary forms*. That is, its miracle was the creation of a new, unidentifiable and inimitable genre of expression. Of cardinal importance in his theory are the reports about the Arabs' bewildered reception of the Divine Message. The Arabs, upon hearing it, were lost for words in trying to classify it: 'Is it poetry?' 'Is it magic?' 'Is it soothsaying?' 'It is only the stories of the ancients!' *The Arabs could not find a literary form to which the Qur'an corresponded.*

Thus it is absolutely essential for Bāqillānī to disqualify the Qur'an from existing categories of composition, taking apart the opinions of those who class it as poetry or rhymed prose (*saj'*), invoking the definitions for each – for example, in the case of poetry, the minimum number of verses and the intention of its creator to produce poetry. He produces a table of all known literary forms, such as various types of poetic prosody, words in meter but not in rhyme, words in rhymed prose, words in which meaning rather than literary beauty is the objective, and so on⁶¹ – and the Qur'an falls into none of these.

He goes further yet in arguing his case on 'unclassifiability' when he dismisses as factors in *i'jāz* the rhetorical figures involved in *badī'* and *balāgha* – many of which Rummānī before him had found well suited to the task – such as *isti'āra* (metaphor), *tashbīh* (simile), *mubālāgha* (hyperbole), *ījāz* (conciseness) etc.⁶² His reasoning is that this gamut of devices is something that can be 'attained with learning and practice ... there is a path for it to be trodden ... and a model which the one who seeks it can emulate'.⁶³ Talking of the divisions of *balāgha*, he objects to making them the essence of the miracle on the basis that they have a 'maximum' degree of accomplishment that can be reached; they are quantifiable. Although he permits these

elements to contribute to the miracle of eloquence (and among the elements of *balāgha*, he specifically admits *isti'āra* and *bayān* because these seem to have no 'maximum'), yet the sum is greater than its parts, and these tributaries cannot *in themselves* contain the secret of *i'jāz*.⁶⁴

It might indeed seem that the premise has become the conclusion, and the 'otherness' of the Qur'an is a yardstick for the exploration and definition of this very otherness; its divine origin rules out all human measures and literary paradigms. Thus Bāqillānī does not accept a *hierarchical* explanation for *i'jāz* – i.e. the miracle consisting in a *level* of excellence; the Qur'an's eloquence is *sui generis*, totally outside both human forms (let alone levels within forms) of literature; it has no '*ṭarīq*' and falls within no '*bāb*'. To be sure, it may *include* familiar elements, but only to assimilate them in this unclassifiable otherness. For if the Qur'an 'did not fall outside the styles they speak in, and it fell within them, no miracle would occur'.⁶⁵

This rather 'mechanistic' way of perceiving *i'jāz* – which might, at first thoughts, seem to demand no proof of the Qur'an's *eloquence* since its singular unclassifiability is the crux – is underpinned by a conception of poetry and poets that had wide currency in Bāqillānī's time. Poetry was conceived of as a craft (*sinā'a*), practised by what S.A. Bonebakker has called 'scholar-poets', who usually had to begin by imbibing the pre-Islamic poetic legacy and gaining a firm grounding in literature before going on to create their own works.⁶⁶ Learning was inextricably linked to creation and, especially in the Abbasid period, poetry was 'predominantly literary and craftsmanly'.⁶⁷ In line with this conception, Bāqillānī shows great zest in depicting poets as 'following a method' and breaking them down to analysable, nameable ingredients – be they themes or formal conventions – whilst stressing the amount of borrowing that goes on among poets: there is no poet who does not rely on the ideas of another.⁶⁸ Originality and virtuosity are expelled from Bāqillānī's survey of human creativity, which is classifiable and finite,⁶⁹ and poetry is described as having a *law* (*sharī'a*).⁷⁰ 'As for the unattainable height of the Qur'an, there is no model for it to be followed'⁷¹ and its eloquence cannot be explained by mere skill (*hidhḡ*) and superior ability (*taqaddum*).

Yet as noted above, it is one thing to render the Qur'an 'unique' and another to show that its uniqueness pertains to an exquisite level of eloquence. This Bāqillānī tries to show firstly *negatively* – by subjecting Imru'l-Qays' *mu'allaqa* (among the ancients) and Buḥturī's *lāmiyya* (d. 897, among the moderns) to a scathing anatomy and revealing the weaknesses of even the best of poets (although for Bāqillānī, the moderns pale before the ancients). M. Mir very aptly points out that this analysis 'shows a hearty disregard for the difference between the nature of literary analysis and that of logical analysis. Literary analysis calls for sympathy and involvement ... logical analysis ...

[for] cold objectivity', which when applied to literature 'would be like taking a butterfly through a car wash' (a happy way of describing the process).⁷²

Examining Bāqillānī's treatment of Imru'l-Qays, he says that 'he sees contradictions where none exists, fails to appreciate significant departures from normal usage and ordinary syntax, turns an unappreciative eye to subtle semantic shifts, picks holes in apposite metaphors, and brings unwarranted charges of redundancy'. His view is that his criticism overall is not only vulnerable but also counter-productive, inasmuch as the charges levelled against the poet could be turned against the Qur'an itself. Buḥturī is treated in similar harsh fashion.

Von Grunebaum's description of Bāqillānī as a 'layman' in the field of literary criticism could only be corroborated by such an approach;⁷³ and there is more evidence for his lay (if we thus decide to call it) vantage point in the attitude he takes towards the enterprise of literary criticism in general, even whilst engaging in it. In frequent excursions from his main task of proof and argumentation, Bāqillānī persists in uttering certain vague and mysterious references to a nebulous group of 'experts' and 'connoisseurs'. These *ahl al-ṣan'a, udabā'* and '*ulamā'*' always appear in the third person and never fail to be eulogised for their possession of unerring acumen in literary matters, which they acquired by means of steeping themselves in the knowledge of literary works and plumbing the depths of eloquence.⁷⁴ On the downside, 'criticism (*naqd*) of speech is strenuous and drawing distinctions within it difficult'.⁷⁵ On the upside, those erudite connoisseurs are not in two minds about the miraculous eloquence of the Qur'an, nor is it 'a matter of doubt for a person of insight'.⁷⁶ (But alas, these paragons of knowledge are becoming hard to come by, and 'gone is the one who could judge poetry').⁷⁷

It would be quite in keeping with the spirit of the age to conceive of literary criticism as a specialised domain of knowledge, which denies the 'subjective response' to poetry, as K. Abu Deeb explains. Ibn al-Mu'tazz, Qudāma, Āmidī – to name a few – had already made their contributions towards systematising literary criticism and thereby sequestering it from the judgement of ordinary people.⁷⁸ But where, then, does Bāqillānī's approach fall?

A survey of his *positive* method for discerning *i'jāz* will answer exactly this question. Bāqillānī is no pessimist, despite his lamentations on the rigours of this science and the extinction of its proponents. If he is not put down by these thoughts, this is probably because his final tack is to disentangle himself from the strictly analytical method and take a different approach – an approach which cannot but be described as *subjective* and *intuitive*. For when he finally turns to the Qur'an itself, his style can be summed up as follows: citation of verses; elucidation of meaning and/or (more frequently) enthusiastic exclamations on the wonderfulness and splendour of con-

struction of the verses; exhortations to 'think' and 'see', to ponder the verses and 'ask ourselves' whether greater eloquence could ever be. His advice is to take the Qur'an home and go over it in the 'method' he has shown.⁷⁹

It is abundantly obvious that Bāqillānī is not – here at least – concerned about any possible sceptics. Indeed, the *coup de grace* to his analytical intentions is delivered when he turns the perception of *i'jāz* into the emperor's new clothes (or shall we say: 'into an article of faith'?), when he says that only one 'deficient' and 'falling short' of knowledge can doubt the miraculous eloquence of the Qur'an – deny it and 'you know that you belong to the commoners' and have no choice but *to accept it by taqlīd*.⁸⁰ The references to those mysterious connoisseurs have served a vital purpose.

The tapestry of Bāqillānī's thought is richer by far than one can unravel in such limited space. However, we cannot proceed further before clarifying what appears to be his real stance on *i'jāz*. And the position he adopts is primarily a theological one, which spares him the need to embroil himself in literary niceties and definitions. In his *al-Farq bayna'l-mu'jizāt wa'l-karāmāt* and also his *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, the picture of *i'jāz* we garner is quite different from what we have seen above. Bāqillānī here explains that the miracle is not in the visible act (*fi'l*) at all, but in God's creation of the ability (*iqdār*) in its human carrier.⁸¹

This position was adopted by not a small number of Ash'arite *mutakallimūn* after Bāqillānī. If its corollaries seem obscure, that is probably because of the sudden shift away from 'miracle as proof' to the level of the theological definition of a miracle. But what it entails is that the onus is shifted away from the miraculousness of the Qur'an itself and onto God, a miracle being one of God's acts. Having located the miracle in the level of God's administration of human abilities, this is only a stone's throw away from recognising deterrence (*man'*) and *ṣarfa*. And indeed, as mentioned in passing above, Bāqillānī *does* extend his support to this theory in the end, to the chagrin of the exponents of a literary perception of the miracle. Thus the miraculous act claimed by the prophet as the proof of his truthfulness can involve *incapacitation* (e.g. if a prophet claims that moving his foot is the proof and everyone besides him is temporarily paralysed) or *capacitation* (e.g. the case of a prophet lifting a mountain or flying to the sky).

Shifting the onus onto God leads to another result: in a surprising display of simplicity – or even naivety – it is affirmed that God will *always* support the truthful claimant to prophethood and discredit the false one, and will never be confused whether something that looks like a miracle is a deceptive trick.⁸² This, of course, points to an exasperation at the possibility of proving the miracle through the miracle itself; indeed Bāqillānī explicitly tells us that the reason why it is best to take the *iqdār* as the *i'jāz* is because one may be confused about whether a miracle is false or

true. For Bāqillānī in his *Tamhīd* is declaring himself beaten in trying to tell the difference between a work of genius and a work of divine provenance when, to the question whether the works of Euclid, Ptolemy or Imru'l-Qays could be claimed as proofs of prophethood, he replies in the affirmative to our great surprise. And he explains that 'if God knew that the one who claimed such a thing was a liar, He would certainly stir people up ... to counter what he challenged people with'.⁸³ All miracles, thus, are true, for God is responsible for coming to the aid of truth, and no human criteria for differentiation are needed. In default of explaining how the Qur'an is leagues above the poetry of an Imru'l-Qays, it is ultimately the circumstantial proof that will carry the day: the Qur'an was not imitated.

Interestingly enough, the problem of differentiating between works of genius and a work of divine inspiration is one that was put into circulation earlier than Bāqillānī's account of it. Abū Hāshim (d. 933), whose floruit would be placed at the end of the 9th century and the first quarter of the 10th and whose opinions are reported in °Abd al-Jabbār's *Mughnī*, makes mention of the same set of works (Euclid's, Ptolemy's), adding the works of the grammarians Sībawayh and Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (he mentions the °*Arūḍ* penned by the latter). His reasons for saying that one cannot compare these with the Qur'an in terms of being 'inimitable' and 'miraculous' are intriguing: essentially, it is because, according to him, such works are constructs of meaning, and by meaning he means knowledge. Since they are knowledge, no 'more' or 'less' can obtain in them which allows for competition, because 'arithmetic and geometry can only occur in a single way, since the basic principles are division and multiplication, and these two can be no different'. The only difference between people will be in how proficient and capable they are of comprehending these fields of knowledge. In contrast, speech is an area in which levels of excellence do obtain. The implication is that in the former kind of endeavour, one is passively accessing a pre-existing 'whole' of information using objective and unchanging principles, while in the latter one is engaged in an active, creative task whose product will be original and new; and for °Abd al-Jabbār, the unpredictability of the result owes something to the fact that divine grace and succour are amongst the (fluid and inconstant) factors that contribute to eloquence.⁸⁴ Underlying this idea is an epistemological realism, wherein knowledge possesses a static and objective existence independent of the mind of the knower; the 'knower' is not a *constructor* of theory, nor is meaning a form of *creation*. The problems facing this account are two: first of all, the implicit analogy of Qur'anic meaning with geometrical or grammatical knowledge. Did Abū Hāshim really intend to present the meaning of the Qur'an to be as fixed and immutable as those other forms of knowledge? That would seem to go against the grain of the Mu'tazilite approach towards the Qur'an, whose starkest embodiment was in designating it as 'created', a posture that was of great benefit in coping with the problem of

predestination. Secondly, this method does not suffice for treating the question of an Imru'l-Qays – that is, of literary prodigies. Such problems are only partly dealt with through other, extrinsic differences between the two types of work that 'Abd al-Jabbār highlights, which basically show that the conditions of a claim to prophecy do not obtain in these works.⁸⁵

So to return to Bāqillānī, we must then note the two implosions that have taken place: in Bāqillānī's literary work, we see him lapse into the intuitive – the Qur'an's *i'jāz* is evident; in his other works we see him lapse to an uncomplicated faith in God's protection of the truth – all miracles are evident and true. The outsider is not negotiated.

We will have occasion to visit Bāqillānī again when we try to shed some light on the theological implications of *i'jāz*. But here we should juxtapose Jurjānī's treatment of the same topic, and in the same paradigm, and examine the success of *his* approach.

Jurjānī: The Self-Sufficiency of Literary Thought

Jurjānī enters the stage in his *Dalā'il al-i'jāz* with the sure step of a trailblazer; like Bāqillānī before him, he too is discontented with the previous treatments of the topic and proposes to map out a definitive paradigm for understanding the Qur'an's inimitable eloquence. He denounces those who say that *i'jāz* must be accepted by *taqlīd*, he rejects merely comparative approaches for gauging eloquence and he is categorically opposed to intuition and subjective responses – that is, to the ineffability of things: '[eloquence] is a *certain special quality* in the manner of *naẓm* or a *certain special way* of joining words'.⁸⁶ No, rather for everything there is a proof and a reason: 'For every expression you ajudge to be good ... your judgement must have a known source and a rational cause'.⁸⁷ However, it may require effort and learning to discover them; yet this rigorous exertion is nothing less than fulfilling our obligation to God, and the facile perfunctory approaches to eloquence and *i'jāz* are no less than a transgression against Him.⁸⁸ Concomitantly, he rejects circumstantial evidence as a testimony to the Qur'an's inimitability⁸⁹ and sets out to establish the case on purely literary proofs.

To that end, he endeavours to build a theoretical basis for judging literary composition and to define the terms of the system, beginning by *naẓm*, the pivot of literary quality, which is defined as 'attaching words to each other and making some (words) causes for others' according to the principles of grammar and syntax.⁹⁰ Examining the relation between words and meanings, he debunks the 'philistine view' which has it that eloquence subsists in words, showing that figures of speech such as metaphor or simile – a fulcrum for eloquence⁹¹ – clearly contradict that, since they function as meanings which signify secondary meanings.⁹² Rather, meaning is to word what

matter is to form, and what gold is to the finished piece of jewellery.⁹³ A corollary of this view, which occupies centre stage in his literary theory, is that no two meanings are alike, and that – contrary to the widespread, rather facile view that meanings stay the same and can only be expressed in a better or different way – one man's meaning is never the same as that of another and everyone creates new semantic shades by his choice of expression. Undertaking a detailed examination of the various devices involved in the nature of eloquence (such as *taqdīm/ta'khīr*, *tawkīd*, *isti'āra*, *tashbīh*, *kināya*, *ta'arīf*, etc.), he explains how they are utilised and what effect they produce using examples culled from poetry as well as the Qur'an.

As a study of eloquence and as an articulation of a theory of meaning, the work has been commended for its thoroughness and systematic approach. That, of course, does not automatically entail a success in 'putting his finger' – to use his expression – on the essence of the inimitable eloquence of the Qur'an itself. So to what extent does he achieve that goal?

First of all, we should note that the orientation of the work is partly explained by reference to the polemical purposes underlying it, insofar as Jurjānī attempts to discredit the theory of 'eloquence as words'. This theory was genial to Mu'tazilite thinkers owing to its compatibility with the doctrine of a created Qur'an, which necessitated that speech be designated as 'material' as much as possible. This approach had been argued by 'Abd al-Jabbār in his works on *i'jāz* (foremost among these being the section on *I'jāz al-Qur'ān* contained in his *Mughnī*), against whom Jurjānī is thought to be arguing.⁹⁴ 'Abd al-Jabbār's approach has been described by Y. Rahman as one that 'lays great stress on the arrangement of the words (*tartīb al-alfāz*). Ideas and meanings (*ma'ānī*), on the other hand, are relegated to a secondary position'.⁹⁵ This general diagnosis does not mean that the choice between a word-based theory and a meaning-based theory was an either/or choice in which the Mu'tazilites opted for 'words'. In a sense, the choice was not open: for it would in fact appear that if 'Qur'an as words' is crucial for their doctrine of the created Qur'an, yet on the other hand 'Qur'an as meaning' is equally pivotal for their rational stand on ethics, due to the double meaning of the word '*afāda*' which may indicate both 'meaning' and 'benefit'.⁹⁶

As against this word-biased stance, Jurjānī labours to establish the role of meaning in aesthetic appreciation, which may well be connected to the Ash'arite division of speech into phonic and internal (*kalām lisānī*, *naḥsī*; more will be said on this below), the latter being equated with meanings and supporting the doctrine of an uncreated Qur'an.⁹⁷ These polemics remind us of the context of the various religiously flavoured discussions of the issue – yet this is a rather fortuitous reminder, while this dispute otherwise only strengthens the impression that Jurjānī is more intent on build-

ing the theoretical edifice of literary criticism than on anything else; he does not *use* his own theory to show how the Qur'an itself is inimitable, and so for all intents and purposes it is only a theoretical dispute, and is really in line with the spirit of his work as a whole.

The problem with his approach as a means of perceiving the Qur'an's inimitability is foreshadowed by the above remarks, inasmuch as it seems to lie in the very nature of creating a science and systematising knowledge. Is it possible to categorise and name without *subjecting* the objects of this endeavour to the system and without rendering them 'like ...' and 'similar to ...' and 'an example of ...'? Could the eloquence of the Qur'an be named and explained according to systematic precepts articulated for literary works in general – including human works of course – without depriving it of a degree of its 'otherness', its miraculousness? Perhaps it could, but in Jurjānī's case, one would say, it does not.

What this means is that articulating the paradigm of evaluation and its criteria overwhelms and eclipses the objective of showing the *unique* eloquence of the Qur'an. In chapter after chapter of Jurjānī's analyses, the Qur'an is merely the illustration of a precept, jostling next to examples from poetry, and the analysis of its verses serves the purpose of explaining the 'machinery at work'. The Qur'an becomes 'an example of what I mentioned above'. Thus, despite his statement that the Qur'an must possess a quality (*wasf*) that had not existed before it,⁹⁸ the impression one is left with is that this novelty has not been captured. And though he remonstrates against those who make words – or even rules of grammar and syntax – the seat of *i'jāz*, it is *all* literary works that this extends to and aims to protect.

Perhaps the reason he can afford to take this approach is his *a priori* belief in the miracle; for, arguing against *ṣarfa*, he speaks of the Arabs as having been dazzled and struck into wonderment by the Qur'an – and not by their sudden inability, as would have occurred in the case of *ṣarfa*⁹⁹ – and seems to take its immediate impact for granted. Thus his goal in *Dalā'il* could be, not to reveal the miraculousness, but to analyse it – if one can draw such a distinction.

He too, like Bāqillānī, portrays literary criticism as a specialised science of 'secrets' (*asrār*) and 'subtleties' (*laṭā'if*), requiring assiduous pursuit and great intellectual exertion;¹⁰⁰ it is a science for the elite (the people of '*al-dhawq wa'l-ma'rifa*')¹⁰¹ – a conception which had, as mentioned above, become a hallmark of the domain; and of course, the greater the systematisation, the more specialised the knowledge. If he too is the 'insider', it is not in a religious but a specialised scientific sense; and such specialisation throws his discouragement of *taqlīd* into vivid relief and calls it into question.

In the light of the above, it may not be an accident that the rhetorical paradigm Jurjānī elaborated did not trace its footsteps back to the *iʿjāz* discourse and inject it with a new life and that, with the exception perhaps of Zamakhsharī's commentary on the Qur'an, *al-Kashshāf*, which relied on this paradigm for its verse-by-verse exposition of *iʿjāz*, Jurjānī's literary discourse branched out to independent fields of knowledge such as *ʿilm al-bayān*, *ʿilm al-badīʿ*, and *ʿilm al-maʿānī*, which were 'increasingly encumbered with sterile complications and barren discussions almost totally divorced from literary texts and aesthetic pursuits'.¹⁰² Khaṭīb concludes from the shortcomings of Jurjānī's approach that Jurjānī's demise prevented him from writing the ultimate work on *iʿjāz* for which all his other works had been as groundwork; thus, his *Asrār al-balāgha*, his *Dalā'il al-iʿjāz*, and his *al-Risāla al-shāfiyya* were a succession of 'tool-making' introductions which never culminated into the work they had been intended to prepare for and equip.¹⁰³

Bāqillānī's and Jurjānī's approaches can be seen as epitomising the discussion that went on mainly from the 9th–11th/12th centuries. Indeed later writers such as Zarkashī, for example, writing in the 14th century, have little new to add. We can sum up by saying that the direct route of literary proof was strewn with a number of stumbling blocks, which may or may not have been endemic in the effort but may have been peculiar to the specific attempts. The stumbling block for Bāqillānī was his not being *sufficiently* possessed of a literary approach, thus levelling suspect criticism to human literary works, taking the 'otherness' he set out to prove as the premise to a great degree, and finally lapsing to *subjectivity*; while for Jurjānī it was possessing *too much* of a literary approach, and, in trying to 'garden' the domain of knowledge the Qur'an fell into, gardening the Qur'an itself.¹⁰⁴

Theological Implications of the Creed

The last thing we should touch upon is the set of *theological* ramifications *iʿjāz* produced. Although most of our attention has been focused on the literary expression of the issue, our investigation can hardly be complete without addressing these. For, as is well-known, the Qur'an as God's Speech had been at the eye of a religious storm from the 9th century onwards, especially since Ma'mūn's *miḥna*, regarding its designation as 'created' or 'uncreated'; and the theological overtones of the various theories on *iʿjāz* have already briefly appeared in relation to the Mu'tazilite theory of *ṣarfa* which many – albeit nominally – rejected. So it is worth looking at the interfaces between the doctrine of *iʿjāz* and that of the created/uncreated status of the Qur'an.

Now as noted above in passing, the majority of thinkers on the topic are adamant about the fact that the challenge concerned the *words*, and not the Eternal Speech of God or the meanings. This is usually mentioned in relation to the perplexing idea

of the 'validity' or 'feasibility' of the challenge which, according to Zarkashī, cannot be 'like [a] competition in seeing between a blind man and a man possessed of sound vision'.¹⁰⁵

Underlying this stance is the differentiation between two aspects of the Qur'an: the Eternal Speech and the words (usually *ḥurūf manzūma*, *alfāz*, *aṣwāt*); and this very division had been at the heart of a controversy which stemmed from the one on the createdness of the Qur'an and blazed from the 9th century onwards, pitting traditionalists – especially the followers of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal – against many otherwise conservative Muslim scholars. In this debate, the Ḥanbalites had strictly proscribed discussing the issue of whether the utterance (*lafẓ*) of the Qur'an was created or not, an issue in which the holders of *lafẓ* (who flew no specific doctrinal colours) took the stance that one should distinguish between the Qur'an that was written, recited or memorised (*qirā'a*) and the Qur'an that was the uncreated Speech of God (*maqrū'*) – and of course the Mu'tazilites in particular rejected the latter aspect altogether.¹⁰⁶

Ash'arī himself, in homage to the spirit of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, forbore from speaking on the question of *lafẓ*. However, two generations later, Bāqillānī dropped the taboo and drew the distinction between *qirā'a* and *maqrū'*, and after him Ghazālī, Juwaynī, down to Āmidī in the 13th century, all took up the issue.¹⁰⁷ Thus the Ash'arite *mutakallimūn* differentiated between 'internal speech' (*kalām nafsī*, *kalām al-nafs*), which consists of meanings and is the uncreated Speech of God, and 'phonic speech' (*kalām lisānī*), which is 'an expression of God's Speech in its structure ... a rendition of [it]' (Bāqillānī)¹⁰⁸ or 'verbal expressions that signify the Eternal Attribute' (Ghazālī);¹⁰⁹ and the signifier (*dalīl*, *dalāla*), which has been conventionally assigned (*bi'l-iṣtilāḥ*), is not the same as the signified (*madlūl*).

Indeed it is not the rather startling notion of a 'valid' challenge that necessitates this distinction, for it is traceable to a synergy between two things: the need to counter the Mu'tazilite creed of the created Qur'an – since one could not easily ignore the problem of the 'physical' character of the ink of the codex or the voice of the reciter; and also the need to articulate the doctrine of the Qur'anic miracle.

For a miracle involved 'materiality' and 'createdness' insofar as it was defined – by both Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites – as 'an act (*fi'l*) that breaks the custom, and every act is created'.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, a miracle cannot be an Eternal Attribute (for then God's very existence would be designated 'miraculous'). This was fine for the Mu'tazilites of course, for God's Speech *was* an act for them – and nothing more. But for the Ash'arites this was another reinforcing reason why a level of createdness had to be introduced into the Qur'an, rendering it compatible with this definition whilst also recognising the *uncreated* level.

And as Suyūṭī (d. 1505) shows in his *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, the available theories explaining the process of revelation (*inzāl*) of the Qur'an in its two stages (to the *lawḥ mahfūz* and to mankind, through Muḥammad) do plenty to shore up the division between words and meanings. What concerns us here is the first stage, in which God's Speech is seen to exist in meaning before words and letters were *created* (*awjada*) to express it, these words thereupon transcribed into the Preserved Tablet.¹¹¹ The theories concerning the second stage likewise testify to the 'materiality' of the revealed Qur'an, as contrasted with the immateriality of the *kalām nafsī*. It is quite interesting in fact that the tables turn here for the Ash'arites, and it is they who are eager to recruit metaphorical interpretation for the purposes of proving an immaterial uncreated Speech; see, for example, Juwaynī's treatment of the verse 'And if one amongst the pagans asks you for asylum, grant it to him, so that he may hear the Word of God' (Q. 9:6), where 'hearing' is interpreted as 'understanding'.¹¹²

However, the distinction between a created and uncreated Qur'an was to carry Bāqillānī in particular too far. Concluding his examination of *i'jāz*, he makes a rather singular statement to the effect that it is admissible to say that 'God is capable of bringing forth a *naẓm* which is more perfect and marvellous than the whole of the Qur'an'¹¹³ – i.e. to create the Qur'an in another way. It appears that the temptation to accent God's omnipotence is hard to resist: *God can do even more*; and here this is done at the expense of making the Qur'an one shade less immutable, fixed and eternal. Moreover, it is not clear whether it is with a pinch of salt that we should take his contrast between the Eternal Speech and the created, verbal level of the Qur'an (the subject of the challenge), according to which the former 'has no like' while the latter, we are left to deduce, does.¹¹⁴

Perhaps the rapprochement with Mu'tazilite modes of thought – indeed the plunge into one of their dangers – can be seen if we consider W.M. Watt's comment on the controversy on the nature of the Qur'an: 'To say the Qur'an was the created speech of God probably implied that He might have created it otherwise, just as He might create a man short or tall or of medium height. Uncreated speech, on the other hand, would somehow express the essence of God and so be unchangeable'.¹¹⁵

Yet how easily can one sever words from meanings after all? If we take Jurjānī's word on it, the two can no more be parted than form from matter.¹¹⁶ And if Bāqillānī reports that Abū Bakr's criticism of Musaylima's verses was that 'these words did not issue from a god' (or God), illustrating a previous point that the author's character will influence the *genuineness* (and quality) of his work,¹¹⁷ this only goes to show – on a broader plane – that words cannot be disjointed from a number of other considerations, including meaning.¹¹⁸ It may well be possible to do so in theological formulations, but this (rather unnecessary) notion of a 'valid' challenge – in which involving

the Eternal Speech is portrayed as 'foul play' – drags the distinction out into the daylight of practical application.

In any case, the abstruse idea of 'validity' for the challenge did at last catch Bāqillānī's attention when, putting his penchant for occasional equivocation to good use, he turns around in his *Tamhīd* and says that there *is* in fact no problem with making the Eternal Speech the subject of the challenge and challenging men to imitate what they cannot.¹¹⁹ Zarkashī fleshes out the idea further when in his *Burhān* he explains that it would be an instance of '*taklīf mā lā yuṭāq*'¹²⁰ (enjoining what cannot be fulfilled), without, we may add, being a *taklīf*. The rupture between *qirā'a* and *maqrū'*, however, lives on.

We should not be too harsh in pronouncing a 'judgement' on the efforts of these thinkers to explain the miracle of the Qur'an. The difficulty of their task was inherent in that they were investigating no less than the interface between the created and the divine, and attempting to show the transcendence of the divine *even after* it had been manifested into the created order. As for the oxymoron between a *custom-breaking* miracle and a miracle by *proof*, that too should not surprise us¹²¹ – Jazarī was well to the point in saying, as quoted above, that had God willed, He could have convinced us all; an idea which might trouble the Mu'tazilite exponents of God's perfect goodness, but not so much their Ash'arite co-religionists. The latter, for all their attempts at proof and explication, could find some solace, if so disposed, in Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's wonderful formula: '*bi-lā kayf*'.

NOTES

1 See also Q. 2:23–4, Q. 10:38, Q. 11:13, Q. 17:88, Q. 28:49; I rely on Yusuf Ali's translation, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1992), with occasional modifications.

2 For the first manifestations of the doctrine, and also for a history of the use of the term *mu'jaza/i'jāz* see Abdul Aleem's article '*I'jaz-ul-Quran*', in *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933), pp. 64–82 and pp. 215–33, pp. 64ff and pp. 215ff and also G.E. Von Grunebaum, *A Tenth-Century Document of Arabic Literary Theory and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), Introduction.

3 For a full list of entries on the topic, see Abdul Aleem, *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933), pp. 74–5, and also I.J. Boullata's article, which serves as a good introduction to the topic, 'The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an: *I'jaz* and Related Topics', in A. Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 139–57.

4 See T. Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp. 151–8. Although the Mu'tazilites in general, in line with the rest of their rationalist tendencies, were averse to the notion of miracles, it was by no means an unqualified rejection, and some Mu'tazilites gave this point more emphasis than others. Nazzām perhaps heads the latter category (he receives special mention by Baghdādī in his *al-Farq bayna'l-firaq* [al-Baghdādī, 'Abd al-Qāhir, *al-Farq bayna'l-firaq*, ed. M. Badr (Cairo:

Maṭba'at al-Ma'ārif, n.d.)), pp. 334–5, though allowance has to be made of the distortions of heresiographical reports). As for 'Abd al-Jabbār, although, as Khalidi tells us, in his *Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwa* he concentrates more on the miraculous life of Muḥammad than the perennial miracle of the Qur'an, this is not the whole story, for he devotes a lot of attention to the latter in other works (see below).

5 See H.T. Norris, 'Shu'ūbiyya in Arabic Literature' in J. Ashtiany, T.M. Johnstone, J.D. Latham, R.B. Serjeant, G.R. Smith (eds), *Abbasid Belles Lettres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 31–47 for an overview.

6 See his discussion in W.M. Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: OneWorld, 1998) pp. 174–9.

7 Norris, 'Shu'ūbiyya in Arabic Literature', pp. 35–6 and p. 44 respectively.

8 Ibid. p. 35.

9 al-Jāhīz, Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Baḥr, *Thalāth rasā'il*, ed. J. Finkel (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Salafiyya, 1926) p. 43.

10 Abdul Aleem, *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933), p. 229.

11 Grunebaum, *A Tenth-Century Document*, p. xiv n. 7; Norris, 'Shu'ūbiyya in Arabic Literature', p. 35.

12 A. Schippers, art. 'Mu'ārada', *IEP*, vol. 7, p. 261.

13 Abdul Aleem, *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933) pp. 229–30.

14 M.M. Badawi, 'Abbasid Poetry and its Antecedents' in *Abbasid Belles Lettres*, pp. 155–6.

15 Ibid. p. 154.

16 See 'Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān fī dirāsa kāshifa li-khaṣā'iṣ al-balāgha al-'arabiyya wa-ma'āyirihā*, 1st edn (2 vols, Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1964) pp. 482–7.

17 See Abdul Aleem, *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933), pp. 230–1, and J.D. Latham, 'Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Early Abbasid Prose' in *Abbasid Belles Lettres*, pp. 74–5; see J. Van Ess, 'Some fragments of the *mu'ārada* al-Qur'ān attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa' in Wadād al-Qādī (ed.) *Studia Arabica et Islamica, Festschrift for Ihsān 'Abbās on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Beirut, 1981), pp. 151–63: Van Ess takes Ibn al-Muqaffa's intention to be 'experimental rather than polemical' (p. 160). But as a general observation, the fact that a number of the works on *i'jāz* deal with adverse criticisms of the Qur'an must have something to tell us about the role of such criticisms in stimulating the growth of the discussions – see e.g. Khaṭṭābī's epistle in M.K. Ahmed, M.Z. Sallam (eds), *Thalāth rasā'il fī i'jāz al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, 1956) pp. 35ff.

18 Norris, 'Shu'ūbiyya in Arabic Literature', p. 36. Apart from later instances of *mu'ārada*, there were reports about those who attempted imitation at the time of the Prophet, such as 'Abhala ibn Ka'b (better known as al-Aswad al-'Anasī), Sajāh bint al-Ḥārith and Ṭulayḥa ibn Khuwaylid, although the most notorious was Musaylima ibn Ḥabīb who could never be derided enough in works on *i'jāz* for his puerile nursery rhymes about frogs, elephants and similar trivia. See Abdul Aleem, *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933), pp. 228–9.

19 In their exposition of Muḥammad's miracles in general, Ash'arite *mutakallimūn* avoided citing these other (physical, material) miracles because of the 'peculiarities' in their mode of transmission – they were relayed as *āḥād* and could only thus be said to be certain knowledge insofar as the 'general idea' of the performance of miracles was concerned.

20 E.g. see Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 1st edn, ed. I. Ramaḍān (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1994) pp. 52–8.

21 Examples of such works are mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm, *ibid.* p. 56; one of the best-known works in the field is that by al-Qāsim ibn Salām, *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān wa ma'ālimumu wa*

adabuhu, ed. A. Ibn 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Khayyāṭī (2 vols, Morocco: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa'l-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyya, 1995).

22 Jāḥiẓ, *Thalāth rasā'il*, p. 19; for the above, see S.H. Griffith, 'Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'īṭah, a Christian *mutakallim* of the First Abbasid Century', *Oriens Christianus* 64 (1980) pp. 161–201. Griffith's excellent work on Christian theologians of this period – to which I am indebted for this section – includes his 'Faith and Reason in Christian Kalām: Theodore Abū Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion', in S. Khalil Samir and J.S. Nielsen (eds), *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750–1258)*, Studies in the History of Religions, 58 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), pp. 1–43 and his *The Controversial Theology of Theodore Abū Qurrah (c.750–c.820 A.D.): a Methodological, Comparative Study in Christian Arabic Literature* (PhD dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington D.C.; Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1978).

23 St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, ed. and trans. 'a religious of C.S.M.V' (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1953) p. 47.

24 See n. 115.

25 See Griffith, *Controversial Theology*, pp. 283–5.

26 *Risālat 'Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī* (London: Jam'īyyat Tarqiyat al-Ma'ārif al-Masīhiyya, 1870), p. 77ff; and previous pages for critique of the content of Muslim revelation. See pp. 72–3 for the stipulation of miraculous effects as one of the conditions of the true prophet and the signs of the real messenger (*shurūṭ al-nubuwwa wa dalā'il al-risāla*).

27 Abdul Aleem, *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933) pp. 70–4. To resume what was said above, this would furnish another reason why the *i'jāz* discourse would or should be *externally* directed, since the essence of *kalām* was the defence of orthodox creeds in the face of dissenters, whether Muslim or non-Muslim (whence its rationalism of course derived).

28 Ibn al-Nadīm has a list of such books (*al-Fihrist*, p. 58). He mentions works by Wāsiṭī and Jāḥiẓ (the former on *i'jāz al-Qur'an*, the latter on *naẓm al-Qur'an*), but also a work by Ibn al-Ikhshīd on *naẓm al-Qur'an*. This may well be the Mu'tazilite Ibn al-Ikhshīd (d. 938), though in his chapter on the Mu'tazila this work is not included in his output (*al-Fihrist*, p. 210). The likelihood of identifying him as the author increases if we consider that among his followers was the aforementioned Rummānī, who himself went on to write on the topic of *i'jāz* (Rummānī was also called 'al-Ikhshīdī' after his teacher: see *al-Fihrist*, p. 213 – this Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn 'Īsā mentioned amongst Ibn al-Ikhshīd's followers is Rummānī; also see Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*: *irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb*, ed. I. 'Abbās, 1st edn (7 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), vol. 4, p. 1826; and J. Flanagan, art. 'Al-Rummānī', *EP*², vol. 8, pp. 614–15). To ask whether the works on *naẓm al-Qur'an* are works on *i'jāz* would give a clearer picture of the attention the discussions of this topic had begun to attract. The work of Jāḥiẓ on *naẓm* can perhaps serve as a test-case: for we hear that Jāḥiẓ has championed the cause of the Qur'an's eloquence (al-Khayyāṭ, Abu'l-Ḥusayn, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. H.S. Nyberg [Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1925] pp. 154–5: the terms used point to its being a book on *i'jāz*), yet no separate book explicitly written on *i'jāz* is mentioned among Jāḥiẓ's output (Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, vol. 5, pp. 2118–20), which may indicate that his book on *naẓm* mentioned in *al-Fihrist* is one on *i'jāz*. This identification, in turn, may apply to other works contained in *al-Fihrist* that treat of the Qur'an's *naẓm*. For more on Jāḥiẓ's views on *i'jāz*, see al-Khaṭīb, *I'jāz: dirāsa*, pp. 133–53.

29 See below for an examination of the concept of *taḥaddī*.

30 For a summary of the various theories, see al-Zarkashī, Badr al-Dīn, *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'an*, ed. M.A.F. Ibrāhīm, 1st edn (4 vols, Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1957–9), vol. 2, pp. 90ff.

31 G.E. Von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam: A Study in Cultural Orientation*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 97.

32 See Khayyāt, *al-Intiṣār*, pp. 27–8; see al-Ash‘arī, Abu’l-Ḥasan, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. M.M.D. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍat al-Miṣriyya, 1969), part I, p. 296; Baghdādī, *al-Farq*, p. 128.

33 The ‘permissibility’ of such coercion is explicitly disavowed, Ghazālī reports in his compendium *al-Mankhūl*: ‘They [i.e. the Mu‘tazilites] have said: it would be evil on the part of God to display a sign (*āya*) which makes all people submit and believe, because there is no choice (*ikhtiyār*) in that’ [*al-Mankhūl min ta‘līqāt al-uṣūl*, ed. M. H. Haitū (n.p., n.d., c.1970) p. 32]. The context is a discussion of the principle of *taklīf mā lā yutāq*.

34 See references to *Maqālāt* in previous note; Murdār is not mentioned there, but is mentioned in Baghdādī, *al-Farq*, p. 151, and in Shahrastānī’s *al-Milal wa’l-niḥal* [al-Shahrastānī, ‘Abd al-Karīm, *al-Milal wa’l-niḥal*, ed. M.S. Kaylānī (2 vols, Cairo: Maktabat wa Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1961)], vol. 1, p. 69.

35 Abdul Aleem, *Islamic Culture* 7 (1933), p. 227.

36 Baghdādī makes this association (*al-Farq*, p. 335); Shahrastānī, who is writing at a later time when a number of Ash‘arites have already leaned towards the *ṣarfa* theory, is more cautious, whilst noting that al-Ash‘arī himself upheld a stylistic *i‘jāz* (*al-Milal*, vol.1, p. 103).

37 See al-Juwaynī, Abu’l-Ma‘ālī, *Kitāb al-Irshād ilā qawāṭi‘ al-adilla fī uṣūl al-i‘tiqād*, ed. M.Y. Mūsā, A.M. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, 1st edn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1950) pp. 307–8: ‘*al-ma‘nā bi’l-i‘jāz al-inbā’...*’; it is interesting to see the tables turn in Mu‘tazilite-Ash‘arite debate, where it was the former who had been notorious for their interpretation of verbs of divine action as *namīng* (e.g. in words like *idlāl*, *tawfīq*, *hudā*, etc), so as to preserve God’s justice and/or man’s free will. The question of ‘*ajz* encroaches upon issues related to the debate on abilities (*qudra*), whose precepts were used to support the belief that no *man‘* was involved and that men were *never* capable of the imitation. In this context, it was said that ‘one never feels inability to perform an act which he does not have the ability to do’; yet the difficulty of sustaining this is obvious from Bāqillānī’s *al-Farq bayna’l-mu‘jizāt wa’l-karāmāt wa’l-ḥiyāl wa’l-kahāna wa’l-sihr wa’l-nāranjāt*, ed. R.J. McCarthy (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-Sharqiyya, 1958), p. 30, and really stems from the paradox of saying ‘men knew they were unable to’ without this knowledge arising from an ability (see also e.g. pp. 61–5).

38 M.K. Ahmed, M.Z. Sallam (eds), *Thalāth rasā’il*, p. 23; on the issue of whether the jinn were indeed included in the challenge there is an interesting diversity of opinions; for the negative stance, see *al-Burhān*, p. 111; for the affirmative, see Bāqillānī’s interesting idea in *I‘jāz al-Qur’ān*, ed. I.D.A. Ḥaydar (Beirut, n.d.) pp. 63–6.

39 Bāqillānī, *I‘jāz*, pp. 52–3.

40 Indeed he himself asserts it is God who ‘allocated [to the Arabs] abilities that reached a defined limit ... for He knew He would make [the Qur’an] miraculous’ (ibid. pp. 288–9); God is cognisant of these limits and is the one who administers and regulates them.

41 See al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥamid, *al-Iqtisād fī’l-i‘tiqād*, ed. I.A. Cubukcu, H. Atay (Ankara: NUR Matbaasi, 1962), p. 208; Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, p. 309, though he is speaking of miracles in general and not of the Qur’an in particular; Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, ed. R.J. McCarthy (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-Sharqiyya, 1957), p. 157.

42 See his epistle in M.K. Ahmed, M.Z. Sallam (eds), *Thalāth rasā’il*, pp. 75–113.

43 Bāqillānī, *I‘jāz*, pp. 54–5.

44 Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, p. 100.

45 The ‘irreplaceability’ of each word is a recurrent theme, which often leads to the ‘heresy of

paraphrase' (see K. Abu Deeb, 'Literary Criticism', in *Abbasid Belles Lettres*, p. 354) in which a means of gauging the eloquence of a literary expression is the attempt to rephrase it – see e.g. Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, p. 203; the perception of such an 'irreplaceability' can of course too easily be seen as the organic result of centuries' worth of textual fixity and interpretation.

46 Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, p. 93.

47 Baghdādī, *al-Farq*, pp. 34–5.

48 Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, p. 27.

49 An excellent work on the definition of miracles is Bāqillānī's above-mentioned *al-Farq*. Custom (*ʿāda*, but also *sunna*), in the Ashʿarite usage of the word, being the usual manner in which God acts, without though being bound by this custom; thus when He wishes to draw attention to something – such as the prophetic status of a person – the regular order will be broken as a sign. And of course as Bāqillānī shows, the concept of a custom is built on *knowledge*, specifically 'inductive' or 'empirical' knowledge, which, though usually classed with *necessary* knowledge, can have many tiers of specialisation – such as the specialised inductive knowledge of literature which is *essential* for recognising when the literary custom has been broken and a miracle has taken place. On the definition of miracles, see Bāqillānī, *al-Farq*, pp. 45–9 (a summary look), and for that of custom pp. 50–5.

50 Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, p. 122.

51 See al-Iṣbahānī, Abū Nuʿaym, *Dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*, 2nd edn (Hyderabad: Maṭbaʿat Majlis Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1950), pp. 183ff; interestingly, Khaṭṭābī mentions the Qur'an's 'impact on peoples' hearts and its effect on their souls' as an aspect of its miraculous nature which 'only a rare individual here and there happens to know' (M.K. Ahmed, M.Z. Sallam (eds), *Thalāth rasāʾil*, pp. 70–1) – i.e. it is an aspect which, according to him, has not figured prominently in *iʿjāz* discussions.

52 Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, p. 51; indeed for Bāqillānī, it appears that the miracle will only be experienced in its full, *irresistible* impact – an impact equal to that of the parting of the sea – by the enclave of literary connoisseurs – the rest will *never*, it seems, *experience* it (ibid. p. 259).

53 B.G. Weiss, *The Search for God's Law* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), p. 75.

54 This is Bāqillānī's list of themes: *I'jāz*, pp. 67–8, though he never tires of returning to this idea.

55 These arguments rest mostly on a definition of the *ʿāda* of human (spec. Arab) behaviour and also on the reliability of information available about that period, and thus on the principle of *tawātur* (multiple transmission). Although the circumstantial evidence was widely used by *mutakallimūn*, it too has its problems – the possibility of impartial judgement is one of them (see Ṭabarī's commentary on Q. 2:23 '... wa'd'ū *shuhadāʾakum* ...' for this observation – although most writers on *iʿjāz* protest the opposite); another problem for the non-Muslim audience would be the principle of *tawātur* given the Muslim control of the process of transmission of information, while Khaṭṭābī (e.g.) adduces the apposite objection that physical aggression would be preferred to fractious endless disputes over the literary quality of such imitations (M.K. Ahmed, M.Z. Sallam (eds), *Thalāth rasāʾil*, p. 35).

56 See e.g. Ghazālī, *al-Iqṭisād*, pp. 206–8; Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, pp. 345–9; Weiss, *The Search for God's Law*, pp. 76–9.

57 M. Mir, 'The Qur'an as Literature', in *Religion and Literature* 20 (1988) 1:49–64 (p. 50 quoted).

58 For an English translation of selected parts, see Von Grunebaum's *A Tenth-Century Document*.

59 Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, pp. 68–70; and of course, being part of the *mutashābih*, it goes without saying that the meaning of these letters was subject to a multitude of interpretations, some of which connected these letters to the doctrine of *i'jāz*, while others did not. See for instance Suyūṭī's way of linking the letters to the miraculousness of the Qur'an, in al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. M.A.F. Ibrāhīm (4 vols in 2, Cairo: Maktabat wa Maṭba'at al-Mashhad al-Ḥusaynī, n.d.), vol. 3, p. 28; the gist is that the letters were intended to remind the Arabs of the fact that the Qur'an was assembled out of their very language – and yet they could not bring forth its like ('so close yet so far away'). As for Bāqillānī, what he finds marvellous is that the pattern of the letters seems to reflect and to have been inspired by a classification of the letters which was only later codified by the science of linguistics.

60 Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, pp. 57ff.

61 Ibid. e.g. p. 59.

63 Although this aspect of the discussion forms one of the most fertile bequests of the *i'jāz* discussions to the development of literary criticism, here I aim to delineate the approaches taken to *i'jāz*, and thus will not be looking at this facet specifically.

63 Ibid. p. 131.

64 Ibid. pp. 275–7, pp. 283–7.

65 Ibid. p. 84; and 'how can the custom be broken by the very custom itself ... ?' (p. 86). This stark way of understanding *naẓm* as 'genre', in a way that makes a discussion of the Qur'an's special and specific literary qualities dispensable, must have been around before Bāqillānī's formulation. °Abd al-Jabbār, in the section of *al-Mughnī* which treats of *i'jāz*, reports a statement of Abū Ḥāshim's that directly criticises the idea of making eloquence peculiar to a certain genre: 'Eloquent speech is not about having a specific *naẓm*, for an orator ... may be more eloquent than a poet even though the *naẓm* differs – if by '*naẓm*' one means a different style (*ikhṭilāf al-ṭarīqa*)'. °Abd al-Jabbār takes this up and adds: 'Thus we do not believe the Qur'an should [be taken to] possess a kind of *naẓm* as distinct from eloquence', where it seems clear that he understands this view of *naẓm* to be in antithesis to a consideration of the Qur'an's eloquence in terms of a hierarchy of achievement, of 'degrees'. One argument adduced against this position is that it seems to render every 'first' of a genre inimitable – for example, the innovation of poetic form would be miraculous by virtue of 'priority' or 'precedence' (*sabq*) [°Abd al-Jabbār, ibn Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī, *Firaq wa ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila*, ed. °A.S. al-Nashshār, I.D. Muḥammad °Alī (Dār al-Maṭbū'at al-Jāmi'iyya, 1972) pp. 153–4; see Khaṭīb, *I'jāz: dirāsa*, pp. 212–4].

66 See S.A. Bonebakker, 'Adab and the Concept of *Belles Lettres*', pp. 16–30.

67 Badawi, 'Abbasid Poetry and its Antecedents', p. 150 – see his examination of the differences between the Primary and Secondary *Qaṣīda* (pp. 146–66).

68 See Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, pp. 133ff.

69 Ibid. p. 296: 'As for the question, "Does (literary) composition have a finite limit?"... according to our principles, a limit has been preordained for our speech within the bounds of custom'.

70 Ibid. p. 196.

71 Ibid. p. 131.

72 M. Mir, 'Baqillani's Critique of Imru'l-Qays', in *Studies in Near Eastern Culture and History: in Memory of Ernest T. Abdel-Massih*, ed. J.A. Bellamy (Michigan, 1990), pp. 118–30.

73 Grunebaum, *A Tenth-Century Document*, p. xx.

74 These references are strewn throughout, but see especially Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, pp. 133–46.

75 Ibid. p. 216.

76 Ibid. p. 143.

77 Ibid. e.g. p. 139.

78 See his 'Literary Criticism', in *Abbasid Belles Lettres*, pp. 339ff.

79 Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, pp. 197ff. Khaṭīb finds similarly, *I'jāz: dirāsa*, p. 187.

80 Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, e.g. p. 143 and p. 6.

81 Bāqillānī, *al-Farq*, pp. 8ff.

82 See e.g. his chapter on magic, p. 93ff, where the 'naivety' of the account makes one wonder whether it was an academic theological excursion and there was no pressing need for differentiation of the false and the true (yet what of the references to controversial figures of the day, such as Ḥallāj and members of the Ismā'īlī movement – p. 74). His references to the difficulty of telling whether a certain amazing deed is a result of an unusual degree of knowledge – as the Mu'tazilites are said to argue – or sleight of hand make his recourse to *iqdār* look all the more vulnerable (see e.g. pp. 35–6, summarising). Baghdādī similarly asserts that the distinction between a prophet (*nabī*) and a false prophet (*mutanabbī*) is for God to make clear (Baghdādī, *al-Farq*, p. 334).

83 Bāqillānī, *Tamhīd*, pp. 145–6.

84 Khaṭīb, *I'jāz: dirāsa*, pp. 208–9.

85 For all the above, see 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Firaq wa ṭabaqāt*, pp. 156–7. Jurjānī's suggestions for resolving the problem seem to revolve around two main points: first of all, time always tells (virtuosos do not remain at the vanguard for long before they are overtaken in one way or other); secondly, speaking of literary prodigies such as Jāḥiẓ, he stresses their dependence on the works of their predecessors, for the likes of Jāḥiẓ would have gotten nowhere were it not that they had assimilated the literary achievements of those that went before (See Khaṭīb, *I'jāz: dirāsa*, pp. 267–70). This echoes the above-mentioned view of literary production as 'craftsmanly', wherein creation was indebted to learning, and it appears to rest on the further assumption of Muḥammad's illiteracy.

86 al-Jurjānī, 'Abd al-Qāhir, *Dalā'il al-i'jāz*, ed. M. al-Tunji, 1st edn (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1995) p. 47. The above can be found especially in pp. 20–51 *passim*.

87 Ibid. p. 51.

88 Ibid. pp. 25–6.

89 Ibid. p. 26.

90 Ibid. p. 13.

91 Ibid. p. 378.

92 See e.g. pp. 200ff, pp. 275ff.

93 Ibid. p. 197.

94 See Y. Rahman's 'The Miraculous Nature of Muslim Scripture: a Study of 'Abd al-Jabbār's *I'jāz al-Qur'ān*', *Islamic Studies* 35:4 (1996) pp. 409–24.

95 Ibid. p. 417.

96 The Mu'tazilites claimed that certain moral axioms were known through reason to be true – e.g. that lying is wrong, that thanking the benefactor is necessary, and so on. One of these axioms stipulated that 'abath – vain or wasted action – was evil (*qabīḥ*), a proposition intended to support a number of other propositions conducive to the tenet of God's justice (e.g. if God could lie, then His Message would not be trusted, and this would frustrate His own actions and designs, and render them 'abath). This notion links up with the Mu'tazilite

concept of benefit and harm (*naḥ*, *ḍarar*) which are the terms into which moral axioms can be analysed, an analysis which proves the rational basis of these axioms; and one of the ideas of the Mu'tazilite ethical theory flowing out of these concepts is that God acts to benefit human beings (this, after all, is why they were created). It is on this basis that one can understand why it is important that the Qur'an possesses meaning: if it had no meaning it would yield no benefit and thus amount to *'abath* (as mentioned, the double meaning of *afāda* is used in this interesting way – see 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Firaq wa ṭabaqāt*, pp. 158–60). [Note that the above remarks mainly arise from a consideration of the works of 'Abd al-Jabbār on ethics.] In any case, I hardly aim to present the Mu'tazilite diagnosis of the nature of *i'jāz* within these confines, and these are passing remarks which would benefit from a fuller study of, above all, 'Abd al-Jabbār's works on the topic (Y. Rahman's article can only be seen as a cursory examination). Overall, it would be wrong to indulge in generalisations and classify positions and doctrines according to whether they stress meaning or they stress words in literary theory as though this division is exclusive, absolute and unambiguous. The above remarks furnish one reason why this should not be done in the case of the Mu'tazilites. Similar considerations hold true for Jurjānī, who though his Ash'arite allegiances might prod him towards asserting the paramount importance of meaning in literary construction, maintains a balance between the two. The differences between various approaches will be more in nuance and degree, and by comparison.

97 See Y. Rahman, 'The Miraculous Nature of Muslim Scripture', pp. 418–9.

98 Jurjānī, *Dalā'il*, p. 290.

99 Ibid. p. 292.

100 And in fact if Bāqillānī's yardstick for refusing to admit something into *i'jāz* is to what degree it could be learnt by practice, Jurjānī's yardstick for admitting something into the science of eloquence is to what degree it is intellectual – see for example p. 294, where it is said eloquence cannot reside in words because they do not 'have a quality which can be derived by thought'.

101 Ibid. pp. 224–5.

102 Boullata, 'The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an: *I'jaz* and Related Topics', pp. 147–8.

103 Khaṭīb, *I'jāz: dirāsa*, pp. 218–9.

104 My focus here is on the classical period, and so I will not be addressing the later developments in the *i'jāz* discourse, but see Boullata, 'The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur'an: *I'jaz* and Related Topics' (pp. 139–57), for an overview of more recent works and expressions of the idea.

105 Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, pp. 122–3.

106 See Watt, *Formative Period*, pp. 281–5 for an overview.

107 See Weiss, *Search*, pp. 65–9; Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, pp. 102ff; Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*, pp. 115ff; Bāqillānī, *al-Tamhīd*, p. 251; Juwaynī's discussion is probably among the most illuminative on the disputes which gave rise to the distinction.

108 Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, p. 266.

109 Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*, p. 127; see Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, vol. 1, p. 96.

110 Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*, p. 126; also Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, pp. 121ff.

111 Suyūṭī, *al-Iqān*, vol. 1, pp. 116ff; this is not to deny the diversity of the theories ...

112 Juwaynī, *al-Irshād*, pp. 133–4.

113 Bāqillānī, *I'jāz*, pp. 289–90.

114 Ibid. p. 266; however a level of *choice* and *determination* was always present in the conception of *iʿjāz*; it appears that the literary nature of Muḥammad's miracle was foreordained due to the peculiarities of the epoch and the people it was revealed to: because eloquence was the most highly developed skill at the time, the best choice of miracle would be a literary one – just as Jesus, it is said, defied his contemporaries' skills in medicine and Moses his contemporaries' skills in sorcery (see e.g. *Iʿjāz*, p. 301; this idea is ubiquitous in the *iʿjāz* genre).

115 Watt, *Formative Period*, p. 179.

116 And throughout his work, he emphasises the intellectual aspect of discerning eloquence – see e.g. *Dalā'il*, p. 301.

117 Bāqillānī, *Iʿjāz*, p. 281. Khaṭīb voices a similar view, *Iʿjāz: dirāsa*, pp. 227–30.

118 Khaṭṭābī illuminates for us the concept of a challenge, by relating previous examples of poetic competitions – between Imru'l-Qays and ʿAlqama or al-Ḥarath ibn al-Tawʿam – thus hoping to show what model could have been followed; yet of course again we stumble onto the meaning factor, for these competitions were thematic (on wine, on mares, etc.), which would mean only a false prophet could ever participate in such a competition. See M.K. Ahmed, M.Z. Sallam (eds), *Thalāth rasā'il*, pp. 58ff. See art. 'Muʿāraḍa', *EP*², for a background to the concept.

119 Bāqillānī, *Tamhīd*, p. 152; an inability which is implicit in one of the verses on *taḥaddī*, Q. 2:24.

120 Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, p. 93.

121 Indeed *all* miracles involve *istidlāl* in one way or another – for the majority, its historical occurrence must be proved, the examined proof being the transmitted reports; in the case of the Qur'anic miracle, it is its miraculous nature that needs proof (whereas its occurrence is known by *ḍarūra*, through multiple transmission of the text).